

Endymion. It is all the stronger for that discovery being confirmed at the end of the narrative rather than dictated at the start.

The story in fact is an allegory of two paintings, the *Endymion* and the *Galatea*. The patron of the latter, the most prominent champion of classicizing art, shared with the fictional Lantys a shady Italian past and mysterious fortune; like them, Sommariva chose to present his prize work of art – Canova's *Magdalene* – under spectral illumination in a setting of sumptuous isolation. He had coveted the earlier painting for himself and subsequently drawn Girodet into a futile effort to recreate the power of his youthful masterwork. The passages describing Sarrasine's lonely and tortured efforts to recreate the imaginary perfection of "La Zambinella" conflated Girodet's secretive labors over the *Endymion* with his agonized endeavor to express the ideal forms of art and life simultaneously in the figure of Galatea. The sculptor's obsessiveness and the vehemence of his eventual disappointment were anticipated in the anecdote related in Coupin's biography of the violent fit of madness overcoming Girodet when the servant knocked over a lantern near the easel.⁸⁵ Those signs of excessive investment and the protracted gestation of the painting surely lay behind Balzac's going on to write the *Unknown Masterpiece* in 1831, in which the fictional master Frenhofer futilely attempts to give the painted image of woman the ultimate illusion of life, effacing a magnificent likeness through obsessively dissatisfied reworking.⁸⁶ Dejouinne's painting of Sommariva observing the work on the *Galatea* had been an effort to redeem Girodet's struggle as promising a happy conclusion and a fitting companion to the *Endymion*. Balzac entertains no such illusions; his conflation of myth with the contemporary moment of Restoration Paris works to a markedly different effect than Dejouinne's uncomplicated (if dense) celebration of Girodet's creative powers. The world of myth is discovered in the up-to-the-minute world of the living, as both the secret history of the present and the tomb of a terrible beauty that it no longer possesses. "I can give you," says the narrator to Rochevide at the end of the story, "a fine example of the progress made by the civilization of today. Such unhappy creatures are no longer made."⁸⁷ To understand this pompous excuse as referring to Girodet as well as to castrated male sopranos is to catch all the irony in the remark and save it from lame banality.

When Balzac came to write his modern myth in 1830, the larger agony of maintaining the classical ideal in art was there to be seen in the exhaustion of the school of David during the 1820s and the evident lack of any persuasive replacement for it. Balzac chose to handle this by creating a tale that conflates the myth of Pygmalion with those of Adonis and Narcissus. All of those myths, in celebrating ideal beauty, reckon its ultimate cost to be sterility and death. What *Sarrasine* accomplishes is to fold Girodet's ambitions and career into the mythic world where he set his paintings. The outcome is a meditation – translated to the register of sex – on the historical situation in which a set of beliefs about painting was passing away, bringing on its own death through a narcissistic fixation on an imagined moment of past perfection.

Coda: Wounded Warrior Redux

The Salon of 1806 had been the scene of Girodet's great claim to equality with David in *Scene from a Deluge* (pl. 167). It also provided the occasion for the single most extensive work of art criticism of the entire period, the *French Pausanius: The State of the Pictorial Arts in France at the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century: Salon of 1806*, by the art critic for the *Décade*, Pierre Chaussard. As part of his massive overview, he included a biography of Drouais, brought forward for a new age in which, if anything, the artist's exemplary stature would be greater than ever.¹ Retailing information from previous eulogies by Suard and Lenoir, Chaussard gave new life to all of the old tropes of admiration, stressing the preternatural charm, ability and dedication of David's first, unsurpassable protégé. As Girodet, Gérard, and Gros were growing older, the ever-youthful Drouais remained a contemporary of the next generation.²

Chaussard gave particular play to the story (related above, in part I) of Drouais's last-minute frustration of his friends' attempt to draw him away from his unhealthy isolation out into fashionable society. Having advanced as far as dressing in evening clothes and donning his wig, he had stopped before a mirror and suddenly "ashamed and afraid of the consequences of so much affectation in the service of this kind of extravagance, he calmly took some scissors and cut away the four ringlets on the sides that the wigmaker had curled with so much art."³ That incident ties the life of Drouais to the life of the one artist who was to assume comparable significance for the nineteenth century, Théodore Géricault (pl. 187). In a biographical letter written by Théodore Lebrun, the schoolmaster who had been Géricault's friend since childhood, an extended passage concerns their plans to make the journey to Rome together in 1816. He relates calling on the artist some days before they were to depart to find him preparing for a social evening with his hair tied up in curling papers. Géricault showed acute embarrassment at being discovered taking such pains over his appearance. And when Lebrun later withdrew from the trip for purely practical reasons, the artist jumped to the conclusion that his always-loyal friend had judged him to be a vain, unserious dandy and an unworthy companion.⁴

There is an old story, which appears even in modern biographies, that this hair-dressing fixation resurfaced at the start of Géricault's work on the canvas of *Raft of the Medusa*.⁵ So that he would not be tempted by the attractions of his customary social life, he is said to have had a barber shave off the reddish-brown locks he had once so delicately curled. Advanced scholarship on the artist has rightly discounted the anecdote, but the priority of Drouais for this generation of artists locates its obvious antecedents.⁶ In the terms of that



187. Théodore Géricault, *Self-portrait*. Oil on paper over canvas, 21 x 14 cm. Private collection.

legend, the anxiety attested to by Lebrun over hair-style as an index to inner seriousness and dedication was plainly real enough. That it might lead a young painter, inwardly doubtful about his strength and skill, to shed his hair in an effort to exorcize a weak, unwanted part of the self was a *topos* already circulating in the culture: the connection between coiffure and quality of artistic vocation, though doubtless felt keenly, was nothing that proceeded in any original way from within the latecomer's psychological makeup.

Historical understanding begins with the clearing away of myth, and the myths that have clustered around the name of Géricault have been singularly profuse and colourful: the dare-devil horseman whose indifference to danger brought on his early death at the age of thirty-three (in the same year as Girodet's); the connoisseur of extremes who surrounded himself with corpses so as to simulate the carnage of the *Medusa* castaways; the chronicler of London lowlife; the voluntary outcast who painted the insane as one who shared their pain and isolation; in short the intransigent embodiment of the Romantic temperament. At the same time, however, it has to be recognized that the artist himself was also a consumer of myths. Of his startling singularity as an artist and personality there can be no dispute, but singularity is itself a quality that must be put together from bits and pieces of already existing models. And the more one knows about the ambitious young artists who came immediately before him, the less idiosyncratic Géricault's impulses begin to seem. That his art enacted significant reversals of theme and technique in relation to Davidian classicism has obscured more fundamental continuities. In fact those reversals, far from amounting to a Romantic break with the past, were precisely the means by which a continuity could be figured in light of the vastly different circumstances – personal, professional, and historical – under which the latecomer was forced to assert his right of succession.

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Initially the most salient of these circumstances was the absence of a teacher with whom the tense dialectic of equality and dependency could play itself out. Géricault's response was to make literal the cult of precocious originality to the point of rejecting any sustained application to learning his craft, eventually driving himself away from any formal instruction at all. During brief stints in the studios of Carle Vernet (1810) and Guérin (1811), he attempted to substitute spontaneity and bravura for soundness in drawing and composition (so much so that his fellow students gave him the nickname of "pastry cook").⁷ His insubordinate behavior caused him to be banished from the circle of Guérin's personal studio. He lingered for a time in a lower studio among the younger apprentices before slipping away on his own, having spent less than a year with his last master.⁸

In May 1812 Guérin nevertheless found himself on the receiving end of a harsh reproof from the arts minister Vivant Denon, ordering that his student, "Mr Jerico," be barred from the galleries of the Louvre for brawling and resisting the efforts of the guards to restrain him.⁹ ". . . the indecency of his conduct," the minister wrote, "has just proved that he is as unfit as he is undeserving of our favor." Denon's letter does not make explicit the reasons for the altercation, but it does inadvertently signal the fact that the young artist had taken up a more assiduous program of self-instruction in the wake of his leaving Guérin. Coming when it did, his ejection from the Louvre and the forced ending of his



188. After Titian, *Entombment*. Copy by Théodore Géricault, c.1812. Oil on canvas, 45 × 59 cm. Lausanne, Musée cantonale des Beaux-Arts.

autodidact's copying routine left no context for him to be any kind of student and may have hurried his ambition to produce a painting for the Salon.

The seriousness that underlay his erratic public behavior is attested to in a set of instructions to himself, dating to this period, in which he apparently outlines his month-by-month plan of attack on the Grand Prix de Rome. The entry for the final month bears witness to the kind of intense, self-regarding dedication for which Drouais had become the model: "February. Occupy myself exclusively with the style of the masters and compose *without going out and always alone* [Géricault's own underscoring]."¹⁰ And when he chose to put his name before the public in 1812, it was with a heroic single figure. Like the *académies* of David's first generation of pupils, it would manifest ambitions for psychological and narrative complexity of a kind normally reserved for multi-figured narrative.

It was late in the day when he made up his mind to submit a major work to the exhibition, only two to three months before the opening set for 15 October, and he did not even have a studio of his own.¹¹ His independent financial resources allowed him to rent a vacant store, an "arrière-boutique," in the boulevard Montmartre to carry out the work. There he prepared a canvas that possessed the same imposing verticality and larger-than-life quality that Girodet had brought to his *Scene of a Deluge* in 1806. For a subject, he reached back to the Republic's cult of anonymous heroism, but instead of multiplying such examples over the surface of his canvas as Gros had done in the *Battle of Nazareth*

(pl. 161), he concentrated on one figure, who thereby assumed the dimensions normally accorded equestrian portraits of commanders. A friend of the artist, a junior officer named Dieudonné, posed for the face of his *Charging Chasseur of the Imperial Guard* (pl. 189), but the character was any young lieutenant who might have led a charge into the thick of battle; he turns in his saddle momentarily to survey his troops in the instant before engaging the enemy, a movement that allows the spectator to see both his expression and the peril toward which he is headed.

As many have described before, the development of the oil sketches for the painting (pl. 190) passes a crucial point when the direction of the rearing horse is changed from leftward to rightward, while the gesture and attention of the rider, if not actually his seat, remain directed toward the left as before. This uses the body, movement and even the expression of the horse to introduce an internal division within the action and thoughts of the rider. The effect is realized in the final painting with enormous assurance, but it should be recognized that the internal eloquence and complexity of his body is only implied, translated into external surface equivalents spread outwardly in two dimensions. Every directional form leads one's attention away from the torso of the *chasseur*. The *pentimenti* of the horse's foreleg and the sword indicate how extreme this centrifugal radiation was to have been before he recognized the need for some small counter-movements in order to recover a certain compactness of outline. But it is the fact that the core of the rider's body lacks any effective volume, any capacity for action within itself, that necessitates perpetual distraction and displacement toward outthrust extremities, ornaments, and turbulent, luminous atmosphere: the shako offers a more convincing volume than does the rider's chest.

It might be argued in reply that the elaborate modern uniform itself prevents exposure of the body and that the nature of the subject matter prevents the sort of treatment of the body only permitted by classicism's expressive nudity. But the rider's tight sleeves and breeches only reveal how two-dimensional and pattern-like Géricault's understanding of the figure remains, neither modeling nor contour conveying strength in the grip of his legs or the sweep of his sword arm; the signs of strength that work effectively are isolated ones displaced to the ends of limbs: the boot in the stirrup and the clenched fist around the reins. It comes as no surprise to learn that the painting was worked out largely through color studies with comparatively little preparatory drawing. Worries over drawing would probably have prevented the painting ever being realized at all.

Works of startling genius can come about through compensation for deficiencies and the overcoming of self-imposed difficulties. In this instance, as in many others, the imbedded weakness in the work is an inescapable mark of the social on the singular identity of the artist, that is, the mark of those existing identities to which he must somehow answer if he is to complete his own. Drouais's myth provided the culture with its chief narrative of what it meant to be an independent and instantaneously successful young artist, propelled to success by the passion of one's vocation. As much as the *Dying Athlete* had done, the *Charging Chasseur* deployed the heroic single figure in order to expose the limitations of conventional academic instruction and to make the pathos and nobility of that figure into an emblem of the artist's singular, emancipated personality. Because Géricault was not yet ready to match that example on its own terms, the noble body that was its emblem is registered in the *Chasseur* as an absence, a non-body that generates the painting's spectacular compensatory invention by its very unrepresentability.



189. Théodore Géricault, *Charging Chasseur of the Imperial Guard*, 1812. Oil on canvas, 349 × 266 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

(This play of substitution and compensation has a more literal dimension as well in light of the artist's evasion of conscription into the army only the year before by the purchase of a replacement, the unfortunate Claude Petit who died in Germany during the time the painting hung in the Louvre.)¹²

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The exceptional circumstances of the Restoration Salon of 1814 allowed Géricault to double his representation in the exhibition by including the *Chasseur* along with whatever new work he could prepare in time. Again, his bid for renewed attention was a monumental single figure, the *Wounded Cuirassier* (pl. 192), which he plainly intended as a pendant to the earlier work. The effect would be to deepen the effect of the new narrative interplay of antithesis between them: light versus heavy, active versus passive,



190. Théodore Géricault, *Charging Chasseur of the Imperial Guard* (study), 1812. Oil on paper over canvas, 52.5 × 40 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre.



191. Théodore Géricault, *Wounded Cuirassier Seated on a Mound*, 1814. Oil on canvas, 46 × 38 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

mounted versus earthbound, vigorous versus debilitated. The most obvious of these antitheses has always dominated commentary, that is, the one provided by the intervening reversal of fortune of Napoleon's *Grande Armée* in the snows of Russia. While Géricault doubtless made room for that reading, it was just one part of a grandly rhetorical construction of opposed qualities between the two paintings, and this had more to do with enlisting the modern single figure to perform the sort of meaningful work normally reserved for the complex internal narratives of classical history painting.

For that construction to be complete, the absent body of the *Chasseur* had to be balanced by a revealed body. As an initial step in that direction, Géricault seems to have drawn on the legacy of Drouais in a more literal way than he had before – that is, he exploited it for more than its attractive amalgam of attitudes, modes of behavior, and career expectations. The Louvre sketch of the isolated *Cuirassier* (pl. 191) reproduces in modern costume the exact type of Drouais's *Dying Athlete*, (pl. 35). That literalism was quite rapidly modified without being entirely erased: as in the development of the *Chasseur*, he builds drama into his central motif by reversing its direction, in this case swiveling the body around a pivot at the neck, leaving the head and helmet in almost exactly the same position they had occupied in the sketch. The unseen threat on which the cavalryman's gaze is fixed is emphasized by the upward turn of the head and the



192. Théodore Géricault, *Wounded Cuirassier*, 1814. Oil on canvas, 358 × 294 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

illumination from below. This creates a gleaming reflection on the exposed white of the eye and a heightened effect of alarm and distress that can coexist with the figure's heroic composure.

That detail contains the entire logic of the drama, the extreme rotation of the eye upward and back locates the threat somewhere well above and behind the position of the figure; the action is thus one of rapid descent down a steep incline, and the movement of the cavalryman is not directed, as some would have it, toward countering resistance to retreat by his horse. Its purpose, rather, is to control the descent of both, the extended leg of each being braced against their pitching headlong down the slope together. Gravity rules in the second painting, in contrast to its pendant where the horse and its passenger had been connected to the earth by only one spindly, springing limb.

For purposes of balance between the paintings, the addition of a mount was necessary. And the soldier's need simultaneously to keep his feet and to maintain his grip on the animal in turn justifies the dramatic contrapposto of his pose. Much has been made of the horse's strange, occluded foreshortening – the result of a restricted format – as the

painting's most serious failing. But this seems far less serious than Géricault's failure to articulate the key areas of muscular exertion necessary to complete the action. And these again are passages where the costume permits the closest approach to the nude. The thighs of the figure are massive without their underlying structure being sufficiently defined; they cannot convey the strength required to keep the heels planted in the ground and the body braced against the descent and the horse's panicky movements. Worse is the flaccid, perfunctory shape of the right arm, which offers no discernible sense of how sufficient force is being applied to the grip on the bridle.

These failings of execution are overwhelmed in the end by extraordinary passages elsewhere, the daring expansiveness of the painting's conception and its complex dialectic with its predecessor. Géricault's early proclivity for undertaking major Salon canvases at the last possible moment made their impact all the more startling but their conspicuous short-cuts unavoidable. The pressure and the ambitious scale gave him his schooling, painful though it was (having been refused the honor of a state purchase of either canvas, he could do nothing but return them to his studio and later, unable to bear the sight of them, have them rolled and put away¹³). His subsequent, painstaking preparation for a move into true history painting reveals that his public *académies* performed their traditional pedagogical function of marking out areas of deficient skill and knowledge in need of further development.

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In 1816 he turned away from ambitions of immediate public glory and made his serious attempt to win the Grand Prix de Rome and retroactively acquire the traditional formation he had denied himself. A drawing of classical warriors dates from this phase of his development, a composition with one mature, apparently wounded central figure surrounded by ephebic attendants (pl. 193). The sheet shows him belatedly trying his hand at a characteristically school-of-David exercise, its evocation of the homoerotic male bonds within Greek warrior culture being of a piece with the preoccupations of David and his pupils – as so commandingly recalled in the recently unveiled *Leonidas at Thermopylae*. After a predictable failure to gain the final round in the competition, he again fell back on his own resources, making the rounds of Florence, Rome and Naples, throwing himself into a new discipline of classical drawing and command of the nude. On arriving in Rome, he



193. Théodore Géricault, *Classical Warriors*, c.1816. Black chalk and pen in brown ink on gray-blue paper, 18 × 13.2 cm. Besançon, Musée des Beaux-Arts.



194. Théodore Géricault, *The Assassins of Fualdès Carrying his Body to the River*. Black chalk and sepia wash on paper, 21.5 × 29 cm. Lille, Musée des Beaux-Arts.

wrote scathingly of the teaching received by the students at the French Academy, calling it “a bourgeois diet . . . that fattens the body and destroys the soul,” precisely echoing lines that appear in the youthful letters of Drouais and Girodet before him.¹⁴

Despite a stay in Italy of less than a year, he came back to Paris with a command of classical drawing that was doubly astonishing in an artist who remained essentially self-taught. Given the end of the imperial adventure and the depressing neo-royalism embraced by other artists, he faced a pressing question as to what kind of subject matter could carry his exalted ambitions. His drawings from Rome demonstrate that his interest in pictorial action and drama easily carried over into a personal fascination with violence and victimization. In line with these preoccupations, he was first attracted to accounts of the murder of a liberal official in the provinces, a certain Fualdès, which carried bizarre details of secret conspiracy, transvestism, and ritual murder (Latouche, as it happens, was the ghost-writer of the key exposé of the case).¹⁵ He took his meditations no further than a series of drawings (pl. 194), having subsequently found a subject in which horrific experience was redeemed by more resonant public significance: the wreck of the frigate Medusa in July 1816 on its passage to the French colony of Senegal (pl. 195).

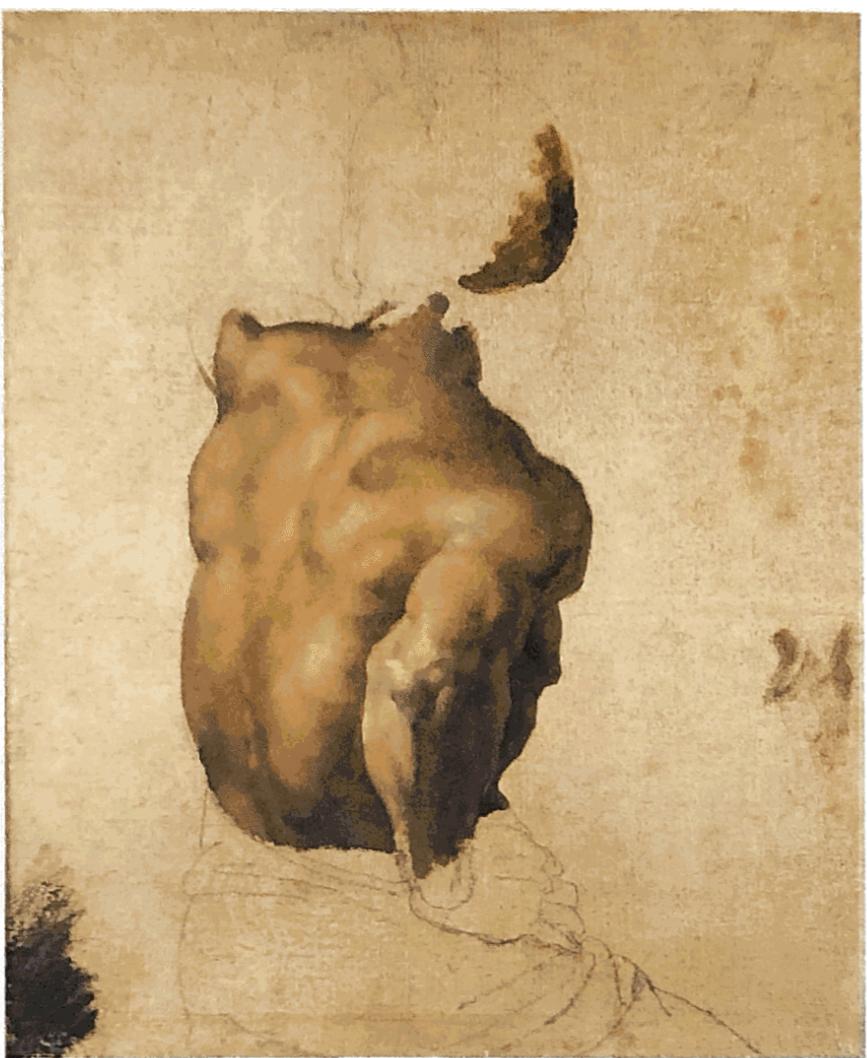
In immediate political terms, the significance of the subject carried a certain ambiguity. The gross incompetence that caused the terrible sufferings of the majority of the ship's company, set adrift by their senior officers on an unnavigable, hideously overcrowded raft,

made for sensational scandal at the time of their revelation. Thanks to a leaked report by one of the very few castaways to survive the two-week ordeal on the raft, the official policy of excluding tested imperial officers from military service came under intense fire.¹⁶ But many royalists, including ministers of state, opposed the policy as strongly as did the alienated Bonapartists whom Géricault counted as friends. By the time that his monumental *Raft of the Medusa* went on display in the Salon of 1819, the scandal had done its work: the king himself had recognized that exclusionary policies were harming the state; the ship's captain had been disgraced, the minister of the marine removed. Géricault indeed believed that his celebration of the catalyst for reform would be honoured by state purchase. Though he failed in this aim, the painting was (contrary to legend) rated highly by the Academy and awarded a medal.¹⁷

Nevertheless, his depiction of the survivors as they struggled to hail the passing rescue ship on the distant horizon would in the end take on an implicitly democratic character. The sources of that meaning, however, lay far more within the demands of his art, as carried within the Davidian lineage, than in any topically partisan debate. The attraction of the horrific subject matter of the *Raft* becomes clearer when seen in relation to Gros's plague-victims of Jaffa in 1799. Géricault lacked his predecessor's direct experience of siege and combat, but did his best in the hospitals and morgues to provide himself with

195. Théodore Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa*, 1819. Oil on canvas, 490 × 716 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre.





196. Théodore Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa* (study), c.1819. Oil on canvas, 55.7 × 45.1 cm. Montaubon, Musée Ingres.

as vivid a substitute as possible. In both cases terrifying disaster and panic in a colonial outpost united officers and common soldiers or seamen into one sacrificial body. Both artists took it upon themselves to explain that sacrifice in some redemptive context for an audience at home. Gros had already used a Dantesque array of suffering and despair to organize the theme in pictorial terms, and Géricault included one obvious homage to the *Plague-stricken at Jaffa* in the prominent inclusion of a despairing father-figure at the left, cradling a dead or dying son and so evoking the damned Ugolino (with an overlay of Gérard's *Belisarius* and his dying ephebe of a guide). Gros's victims were fit soldiers suddenly laid low and so plausibly exhibit the full muscularity of the traditional nude; Géricault uses that model to license the same robustly heroic physiognomies for men who in reality were starving, sun-poisoned scarecrows.

The scores of studies for the *Raft* mark a complete change in his working method; an exercise like the oil study for the back and right arm of his African pinnacle figure (pl. 196) attests to the enormous gains in traditional skill that he had achieved over the previous four years, while preserving the expressive charge in his handling that he had always possessed. The colossal scale of the canvas, if nothing else, demanded a firm structure of drawing and compositional architecture. For the *Plague-stricken*, Gros had



197. Théodore Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa* (study). Black chalk on paper, 18.5 × 26.8 cm. Lille, Musée des Beaux-Arts.

borrowed the arrangement of David's *Brutus* – and travestied its meaning in the process, the automatic charisma of Bonaparte doing most of the work in ordering the narrative. Géricault was painting the same kind of collective agony, but it was precisely the absence of authority, the flight of a cowardly and witless commander, that had created the disaster in the first place – even the eventual arrival of the rescue ship had been an accident. The men left on the makeshift platform could expect no help from any source outside themselves. Géricault had to build an order from within the assembled bodies instead of relying on any that could be imposed from without.

For such a combination of scale, clarity, egalitarianism, and unity, there was simply no precedent; David's *Brutus* had been that artist's deepest meditation on democracy but it had figured its subject in terms of disunity and absence. Géricault found his way to that precedent through the mediation of the *Plague-stricken*, but had to find a structure for the center that Gros's painting so conspicuously lacked – and he found it in the line of the Davidian tradition to which he had already attached himself, that is, the heroic single figure. A key to this dimension of the work is the extended hand of the unconscious youth held in his father's lap (pl. 199). Like everything in the painting, it is twice as large as life, which has the effect of making it seem twice as close as one expects it to be, however near to the painting one stands. The tender pathos of that open palm is so involving in its emotional invitation that, once it is accepted, any disinterested vantage

point outside the composition disappears. The chain of mingled bodies, uniting the races of Europe and Africa, becomes the equivalent of one single body in a state of transformation; its internal quickening proceeds from the group of moribund figures at the left across and upwards through rekindled alertness at the center (where a reprise of the *Dying Athlete* can be seen) to the ecstatic vitality of the frantic signaling at the pinnacle of the group. It is as if the dependent victims of Gros's *Plague-stricken* had suddenly found the inner resources to take over their own redemption. The only figure which is obviously beyond reviving lies on an opposing diagonal to this unified movement, which distributes the physical and moral awakening of one body over the variations of nineteen individuals. This body has a brain, but its salvation is overwhelmingly an affair of nerves, sinews, and blood; the intellect of the group, the four cooler heads clustered around the mast, recedes to secondary importance, and so must the detached controlling intellect in the viewer.¹⁸

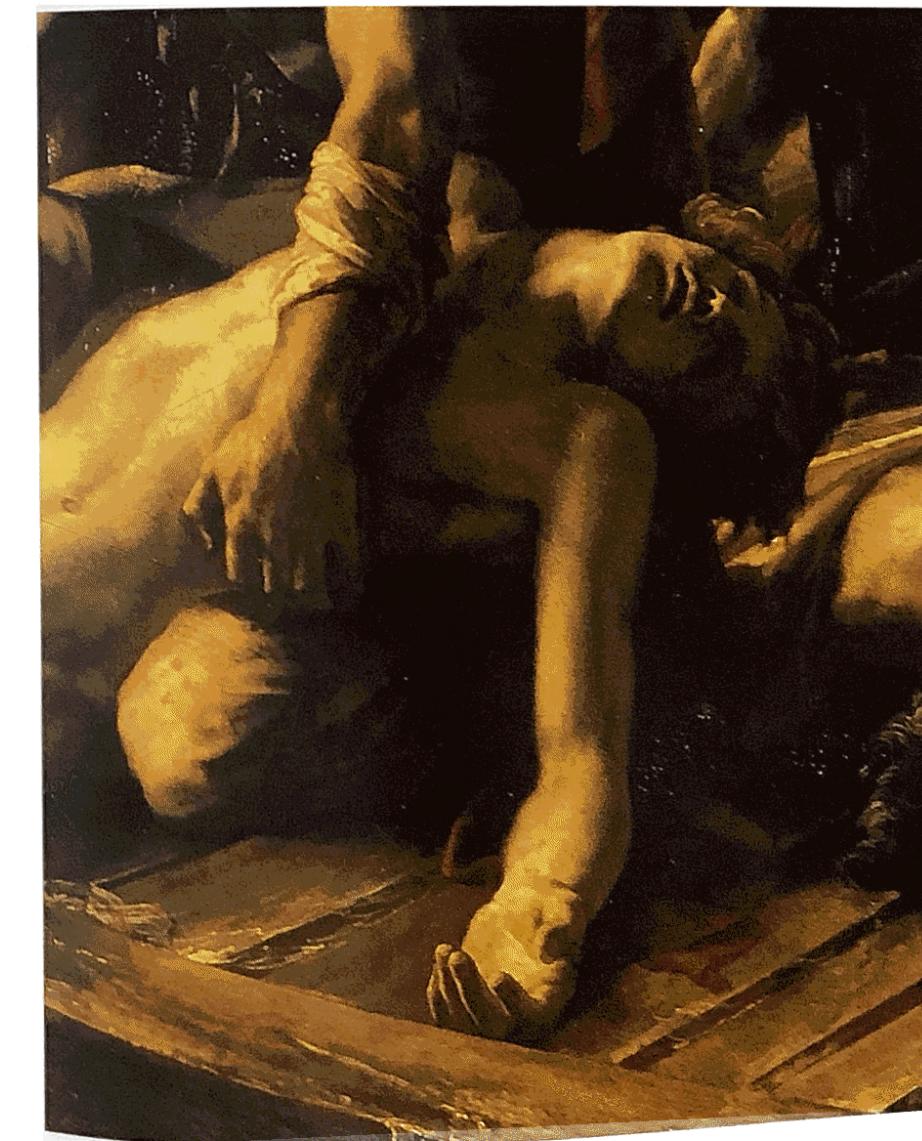
The resulting paradox of the *Raft* is that its colossal size both creates and demands a closeness of approach that is normally the province of an easel painting; its gigantism generates a paradoxical intimacy with one generalized, eloquent human figure. Géricault's catastrophic indecision over the hanging of the painting is a direct manifestation of its double character.¹⁹ Finding that the organizers had placed it low on the wall, he chose instead to have it elevated over the portal of the vast Salon Carré. But even as he stayed to watch his painting being hoisted into position, he recognized that he had made a grievous error. The elevated position is the one he automatically felt to be appropriate for an imposing historical composition: the highest genre of painting is defined by expansiveness of effect and breadth of comprehension; its decorum normally demands a certain distance of viewing so that its totality will be legible and local detail reduced to suitably subordinate importance. The bodies in the *Raft* are painted with all of the imposing generality demanded by tradition, but Géricault and his friends were right to see the painting's force drain away as it was removed from an intimate proximity to the viewer. Without crucial details being immediately present, as they are today in its low position in the Louvre, contact with the drama was lost. The spectator must "believe he has one foot in the water," Delacroix observed, "to perceive all of its merit."²⁰

The dream that had taken shape under the Old Regime, a painting of grand passions and elevated moral import that would be immediately accessible to the common spectator, had finally been realized. That achievement depended on a reconceived *peinture d'histoire* that could voluntarily vacate its symbolic position high on the gallery walls, one that positively needed to be seen up close in direct proximity to the viewer's actual body and point of view. In that way the *Raft*'s theme of solidarity in common life as the only persuasive version of the heroic found its concrete reenactment in the most basic condition of its being seen. David of course, in lowering his *Sabines* toward the floor, had been the first to bring spectator and great historical canvas into direct contact with one another, but the nature of the exchange was one whereby passive individuals consumed a parable of political orthodoxy in accumulated moments of spectacle and sentiment (and then it was distanced again in the mirror he placed in the exhibition). Géricault in contrast found new life in the old dicta of formal and thematic unity so that a non-hierarchical vision of common social purpose could intrude on an event conceived to celebrate the Bourbon repudiation of social equality.²¹

Eventually, before the Salon came to an end, the high hanging was corrected and the painting allowed to engage spectators on its own terms.²² And in the long run it fulfilled



198. Théodore Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa* (study). Black chalk on paper, 24 × 30 cm. Paris, Dubaut Collection.



199. Théodore Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa* (detail of pl. 195).

its maker's ambition to efface his old reputation as the "pastry cook" who completed his *Chasseur* in only two weeks.²³ At Girodet's graveside Gros denounced those whom he accused of defacing the Salon with inflated sketches, but his student Belloc concluded his eulogy with a peroration apostrophizing the radiant spirit of the departed Géricault (who had died ten months before) alongside Girodet's own: "Beautiful souls, glorious spirits, shining with the splendors of the heavens. You have passed among us and gone, but we still follow in the light of your brilliant traces."²⁴

The initial disappointment of his painting's muted impact had nevertheless helped push the artist to a point of exhausted depression, beginning a mental and physical decline that prevented him from ever again undertaking anything like it. He never saw the corrected hanging; within weeks of the Salon opening, his old tutor Castel writes of the artist being confined to his bed at the country retreat of his school friend, the economist Auguste Brunet.²⁵ By the end of October, his distress had reached the point of delirium, and he was carried back to Paris by his friends in a state of serious mental impairment: afterward Castel reported that Brunet was "considerably worried about his invalid. He [Géricault] saw in the bargemen and passengers only enemies spying on him and plotting his death. Poor human sanity, what a sad misfortune!"²⁶ There followed a period of two months for which no known document indicates the painter's whereabouts, and it may well have been in this phase of his life, when his acute illness plainly required medical supervision, that his last great project as a painter took shape.²⁷

200. Théodore Géricault, *Scene of Slave Trading*. Red chalk and graphite on gray paper, 30.7 × 43.6 cm. Paris, Ecole nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts.



201. Théodore Géricault, *The Liberation of the Prisoners of the Inquisition*. Graphite on paper, 11.3 × 12.8 cm. Stockholm, Nationalmuseum.

Though he planned new historical compositions (now on openly liberal themes like the evils of the slave trade and the contemporary struggles of Spanish republicans (pls. 200, 201)), his limited energies permitted work only on a more modest scale. It is fair to say that the prodigious marshaling of inner resources that the *Raft* had required were almost more than one individual could possibly sustain. A work on such a theme could not be accomplished under state supervision, so much was obvious; but without the material support that the state normally provided to history painting on this scale, its demands were literally overwhelming. The immediate circumstances of Géricault's infirmity were only part of the story. High moral ambition in art was parting company from the elaborate machinery of the *tableau d'histoire*, to the point that true elevation would have to manifest itself through other, far more modest means.

This was not the first time that such a reversal had been required. In 1793 David's *Marat at his Last Breath* (pl. 118) had set aside portentous allegory and heroic scale – these having migrated from painting to the mass festivals of Jacobinism – in favor of the plainest attributes and the most stark theatics of illness and isolation. In the wake of his disillusionment over the reception of the *Raft*, Géricault made precisely the same move. His vehicle was a series of portraits depicting the anonymous insane, a group that possibly numbered ten canvases; five at least have survived. It has been the custom to date these paintings to the very last years of his life, to the time between his final return from England in 1822 and his death two years later. This provides a convenient fictional closure to the life, the unknown mental patients functioning as serial metaphors for the artist's isolation, disappointment, and debilitating illness. Though virtually nothing is yet known



202. Théodore Géricault, *Monomania of Military Command*. Oil on canvas, 86 × 50 cm. Winterthur, Sammlung Oskar Reinhart.

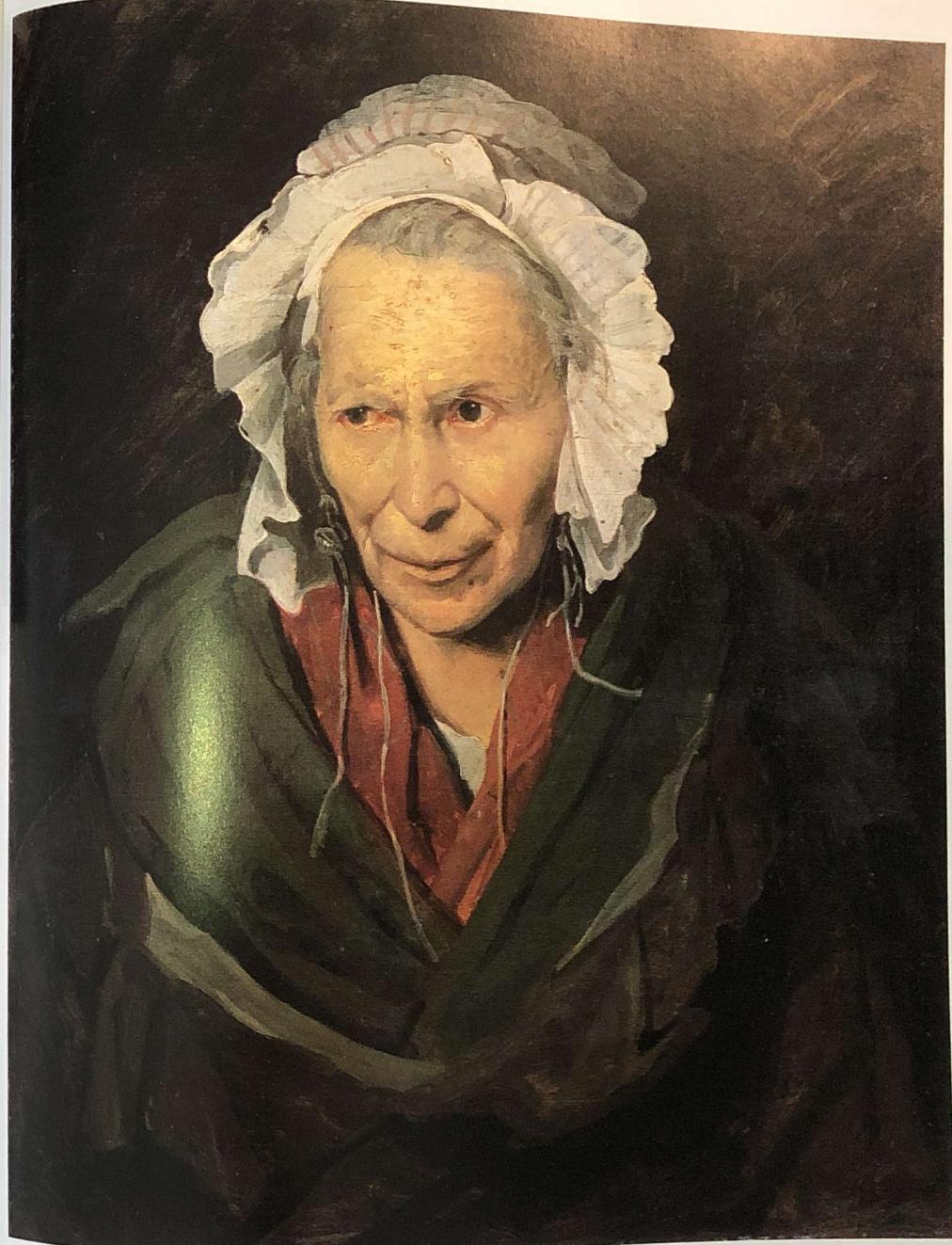


203. Théodore Géricault, *Monomania of Gambling*. Oil on canvas, 77 × 64.5 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

for certain about their history, motivation and intended purpose, some recent scrutiny of the scraps of available evidence has drawn them closer to the period of the *Raft* and to the seam in Géricault's career between the public ambitions of his youth and his late, English-inspired production for the market in prints.²⁸

Since the time of their rediscovery in 1863, the portraits have been linked to the charismatic and progressive psychiatrist Etienne-Jean Georget, who in 1825 would publish his humane and imaginative argument for expanding the scope of the insanity defense in capital cases – and be pilloried by royalists for undermining the state's powers of social control.²⁹ He was the pupil closest to J.-E.-D. Esquirol, the eminent if controversial innovator in scientific psychiatry to whose private clinic Géricault may have been taken in his crisis of 1819.³⁰ Esquirol had created the medical category, “monomania,” on which Georget’s plea would be predicated: the theory that there existed, apart from general delirium, varieties of illness that affected only one aspect of mental functioning and that these could be defined by the single idea that assumed a dysfunctional dominance over the mind of the sufferer. He had posited that the Revolution and its aftermath, in liberating millions whose fate would once have been dictated at birth, had brought about a surge in the number of monomaniacs of irrational ambition, making them the exemplary victims and prophets of modernity.³¹

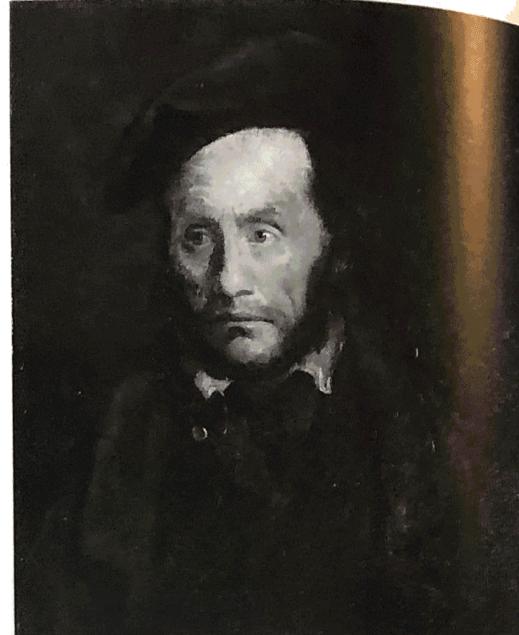
The document of 1803, which conveys the oral tradition surrounding the portraits, gives a diagnostic category for each of them.³² Two of these, envy and delusion of military grandeur (pls. 204, 202), mirror Esquirol’s preoccupation with social diagnosis of the



204. Théodore Géricault, *Monomania of Envy*. Oil on canvas, 72 × 58 cm. Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts.



205. Théodore Géricault, *Monomania of Theft (Kleptomania)*. Oil on canvas, 61.2 × 50.2 cm. Ghent, Museum of Fine Arts.



206. Théodore Géricault, *Monomania of Child Stealing*. Oil on canvas, 64.8 × 54 cm. Springfield, Mass., Museum of Fine Arts, James Philip Gray Collection.

Revolution's consequences. The three others – gambling, theft, and the abduction of children (pls. 203, 205, 206) – reflect an innovation brought to the theory only by Georget's forensic campaign, that there could be monomanias of the will alongside those affecting the intelligence and that the former could be manifested in an overpowering compulsion to commit specific criminal acts. The last category is close to those posited by Georget as having afflicted two famous child-murderers of the 1820s (thus prompting the public attacks on him from the right for advancing dangerously liberal sentiments).³³

Though this entire edifice of explanation rests on a precarious base, the Esquirol-Georget theory of monomania is the only contemporaneous map possible for a series of paintings depicting anonymous individuals in distinctive states of mental disorder. They put Géricault into sympathetic engagement with an emerging and embattled enterprise in science, in that the views of the two psychiatrists only began to be published in 1819 and the term monomania did not pass into everyday usage until the end of the 1820s, years after the artist's death.³⁴ In the Salon of 1819 Girodet had sought to overawe the audience with a superficial mimicry of galvanic effects in his awakening statue of Galatea. Géricault's attachment to science was in every respect the opposite of this, being genuinely novel, dissenting, exploratory, and free from the need for imposing presentation.

The circle of Esquirol, into which he was perhaps pitched by medical necessity, was a "school" of the new century rather than the old. In painting the insane he negated the scale of the *Raft* in order to enlarge its construction of heroism, its understanding that the heroic subject may not necessarily be an effective actor in the world, that heroism may

well be manifested in resistance to forces which overwhelm vulnerable individuals. He found in the task new resources that pushed him into territory where no certified Davidian could follow: he was able to reframe the highest cognitive ambition in terms that had nothing to do with the formal rhetorical instruction of the *collèges*; to set aside skill in treating the ideal body, the defining professional attribute that he had so recently and painfully acquired; and to give up the game of social ambition and self-advertisement in portraiture.

His ability as a portraitist had developed at more or less the same accelerated pace as had his command of the monumental figure, and these paintings unquestionably surpass in subtlety and assurance any of his work in that genre painted prior to 1819: color, texture, underlying tissue of muscle, fat, and bone conveyed with startling economy and with a mobile technique which he is able to vary to surprising effect from subject to subject (this makes the conventional notion of style a highly untrustworthy guide to their dating). He exploits his newly found skills to answer the same demands for elevation and complication in the single figure that his history painting had addressed. Reversing the *Raft*'s passage through the colossal to arrive at the intimate, each portrait begins within a confined and homely approach to one isolated figure but deploys its plain-spoken manufacture and modestly suspended judgment to prompt in the viewer mental events commensurate in scale with those elicited by the most sweeping narrative – there are few paintings that more richly repay prolonged attention.

The school of David from the time of the Revolution had wedded itself to the presupposition that a liberated society could be figured only in a male body of perfect soundness and beauty. Balzac would diagnose the impossibility of this ideal as a medical condition, the injury of castration hiding behind an apparently flawless, beautiful surface. That condition, however, remained a symbolic illness conjured from the same matrix of classical prototypes as the art; Géricault's insane posited another human metaphor for a liberated society, one that realistically incorporated the frailty and inevitable shortcomings of any individual. As Balzac would do, he turned to illness as his central metaphor for historical change, but he found that malady in the modern world – and in disabused self-understanding.